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ABSTRACT

Designed to demonstrate that the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) database is a useful source of information for educational practitioners at all levels, this digest provides an introduction to the ERIC system and describes the National Education Practice File Project (NEPF). This 2-year project was designed to find out from educational practitioners the kinds of information they would find useful, locate appropriate materials, and make this information easily accessible to its audience through the development of a computerized file of practitioner-oriented materials. An overview of the ERIC system briefly describes its acquisition and processing activities; the creation of computerized files for online searching; the publication of two monthly indexes, Resources in Education (RIE) and Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE); and the types of materials the system contains. Information on the NEPF includes the purpose of the study, its participants and activities, and the results of an evaluation of the resulting computerized file made up of documents that were already in the ERIC file as well as new acquisitions. Emphasis on practitioner documents since the completion of ERIC is briefly demonstrated, and a study of the cost and usefulness of ERIC that was conducted for the Department of Education is noted. Hints on accessing ERIC are also provided, and a list of four references complete the digest. (JB)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC FOR PRACTITIONERS

What is the purpose of this digest?

This digest is intended to demonstrate that ERIC is a useful source of information for educational practitioners at all levels — teachers, administrators, policymakers, counselors, media staff, and support staff — as well as researchers and students.

What is ERIC?

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) began in 1966 as the Educational Research Information Center. A widening of its scope and increasing emphasis on practitioner-oriented materials led to the adoption of the current name in 1973. As its name implies, it is a collection of educational materials. It is not, however, a center, but a network consisting of 16 ERIC Clearinghouses, each of which focuses on specific facets of education or subject areas. The clearinghouses look for and actively solicit educational documents which they index, abstract, and send to the ERIC Processing and Reference Facility, which produces a magnetic tape of the input of all the clearinghouses each month. This tape is used both for computer searching and for the production of the ERIC abstract journal, *Resources in Education* (RIE). In 1969, educational journals were added to ERIC, and the results were an expanded magnetic tape and *Current Index to Journals in Education* (CIJE), a second ERIC abstract journal. The clearinghouses are scattered throughout the United States, and all operate under the aegis of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), a part of the U.S. Department of Education.

ERIC contains information on almost all aspects of education. Although it did not originally include catalogs, curriculum guides, and administrator guides, as Central ERIC (the policymaking body in the Department of Education) became aware that these types of materials were important to their ever-expanding clientele, they were added to the already existing research reports, evaluation studies, and other "fugitive" materials.

Now that ERIC is nearing its 20th birthday, the system has matured. Searchers are highly trained and sophisticated, which makes for search results that are focused and on target; materials selected for inclusion in the system go through a far more rigorous selection process than they did originally; and there is a real and concerted effort to locate and include materials specifically for educational practitioners.

The National Education Practice File Project

The National Education Practice File (NEPF) Project was designed to: (1) find out from educational practitioners the types of information that would be of value to them; (2) locate the types of materials identified by practitioners; and (3) make this information easily accessible to its audience through the development of a computerized file of practitioner-oriented materials.

A diverse group of educators was selected to participate in a Working Group which was asked to identify the types of information that practitioners would find valuable. The group included seven teachers, three school librarians, four school principals, four representatives from federal education agencies, and five representatives from national organizations that serve building level personnel. This group analyzed 35 different types of documents and recommended that the NEPF focus on 12 top priority document types: promising practices; learning activities; units of study; resource and background materials; compilations of ideas from journal articles; brief research summaries/syntheses; curriculum guides; lesson plans; fact sheets or ready reference materials; games/puzzles; annotated bibliographies; and worksheets. The group also defined criteria for selection of such documents.

During the life of the two-year project (October 1, 1982 to September 30, 1984), 14,470 documents already in the ERIC system were identified as appropriate, tagged with a new field label PRACTITIONERS, and re-entered in the ERIC files. During the project, 1,234 new practitioner-oriented documents were selected and processed. The five categories containing the largest number of materials were resource and background materials (283 documents); promising practices (246 documents); learning activities (194 documents); units of study (120 documents); and fact sheets or ready reference materials (113 documents). These new documents were also labeled and entered in the system. In the process, individual clearinghouses located dozens of new sources of potential ERIC materials.

The final phase of the project focused on testing the file and collecting data on its strengths and weaknesses in meeting the information needs of teachers and school administrators. This evaluation included a total of 563 computer searches of the file. K-12 teachers and school administrators made 51% of the search requests; the remainder of the searches were conducted for librarians, counselors, students, coordinators, consultants, professors, or persons from intermediate agencies. The top ten types of materials requested were (in rank order): research summaries; research syntheses; curriculum guides; resource materials; learning activities; annotated bibliographies; promising practices; units of study; lesson plans; and handbooks.

Results of the evaluation indicated that the types of materials identified by the Working Group were very similar to the types

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requested by clients at the three test sites; almost all clients were satisfied enough with the search information provided to use the system again; most users of the search services shared their information with others; and there would be a continuing demand for more practical, "how to" documents, that could be put to immediate use in the classroom or school.

Has as much emphasis been placed on practitioner documents since the completion of NEPF?

During 1984, 3,920 of the 14,247 documents announced in *Resources in Education* (RIE) were tagged as general guides; guides for use by students; guides for use by teachers; and guides for out-of-the-classroom educational planning and activities. This amounts to 27% of the total announcements for 1984, indicating a strong practitioner orientation. This trend continued during 1985, when 3,188 of the 12,803 documents announced in RIE fell into one of the practitioner categories for 25% of the total announcements.

How can practitioners access ERIC?

Several years ago, the Department of Education contracted with King Research, Inc., to study the cost and use of ERIC. This study showed that ERIC information is available at an estimated 3,269 different locations throughout the United States. Slightly more than half of these are located in institutions of higher education, and another 25% in libraries and information-providing organizations that serve elementary and secondary education; and ERIC resources are used more than 1.7 million times annually and provide clients with more than 30 million bibliographic records or primary documents. Most state departments of education provide access to ERIC; most ERIC Clearinghouses provide computer searches of the literature in their specialized subject areas; there are education information centers such as the SMERC (San Mateo Educational Resources Center) in California which provide educational information to practitioners; most college and university libraries subscribe to the ERIC abstract journals; and many academic libraries provide computer searches for their clientele. A telephone call to any state department of education will probably put an inquirer into contact with a source for accessing ERIC.

Conclusions

The information obtained through the NEPF and its activities, together with subsequent statistics, indicate that ERIC is indeed a powerful and useful system for disseminating needed information to the educational community, and could be an important tool in the national push for excellence in education.

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